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(Article begins on next page)

“Urban Fossils”: half-serious reflections on fossilization processes

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Paleontology is taught in schools and is often the subject of documentaries and newspaper articles, but most students and adults have no opportunity to find real fossils in their daily lives, which is usually spent in urban environments. On the other hand, the projects of active dissemination of paleontology have to take into account the rules governing the collection of fossils and the fact that these are generally rare and not easily accessible.

Our project offers the opportunity to reflect actively on the processes enabling fossilization and to experience "fossil hunting" as an amusing search in urban environments. “Urban Fossils” started as a photographic project by Francesca Cirilli, and developed into a photo contest, an exhibition, and a catalog.

The idea of questing and registering traces of "past actions" recorded in asphalt and concrete pavements and roads (bottle caps and bolts, but also traces of humans and other animals, load left by scaffolding etc.) will stimulate the participants (students and young adults) to reflect on fossilization processes and the amount of information that fossils provide us. Are these true fossils? Can we make a parallel with ichnofossils? If so, to which ethological category do they belong? Also, are we really sure that the rocks used in buildings, sidewalks, and streets do not hide true fossils?

After the contest (hosted over the internet on a FB page), the photos of the ten most significant urban fossils (including that scoring the highest number of "like" on FB) and the photographic series "Urban Fossils" by Francesca Cirilli, will be included in the catalog published by the Museum of Natural Sciences of Turin (MRSN), Italy. The exhibition of the published pictures will be organized in Turin in collaboration with the project PROGEO-Piemonte and MRSN and will be hosted by several Italian museums of Natural History from autumn 2015.

Since many of the urban fossils are ephemeral and doomed to destruction at "catastrophic" events (eg. maintenance of roads and sidewalks), a virtual collection (hosted on the PROGEO-Piemonte website) will preserve in time their photographs, allowing and promoting continue discussion on aspects of paleontology generally neglected outside the academia, such as ichnology and taphonomy, and on the traces that we, humans, will leave on Planet Earth in the Anthropocene.